



The Honorable Kathy Hochul
Governor of New York State
Executive Chamber
State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Hochul,

We, the undersigned immigrant rights and legal services advocates, urge you to make strong investments in the Fiscal Year 2026 State Budget for legal services supporting immigrant New Yorkers. The moment could not be more critical to support state-funded immigration legal services providers, as federal attacks mount; on March 21, 2025, the Trump administration announced a near-total shutdown of federal funding for programs that provide representation in immigration court to unaccompanied children. New York must step up and ensure that more immigrant New Yorkers do not lose access to counsel in the middle of cases that may mean the difference between life and death. We specifically call for:

- \$165 million in total funding to fund immigration legal services, consisting of \$100 million for the Office of New Americans (ONA) and \$65 million for the Department of Education (DOE). This critical funding will fund the recruitment and retention of lawyers, especially in underserved regions, including the launch of much needed legal services infrastructure and foster the development of new immigration legal experts through law school clinics, training programs, and fellowships.
- Enactment and funding of the *Access to Representation Act* (ARA, S141/A270), which guarantees legal representation for any New Yorker facing deportation who cannot afford a lawyer.
- Enactment and funding of the *Building Up Immigrant Legal Defense Act* (BUILD, A2689/S4538), which will ensure that legal services programs have the infrastructure they need to sustainably scale to meet the needs of a changing immigration legal landscape.

The federal government has launched attacks against immigration legal services that are critical to helping immigrants understand their rights and navigate complex court proceedings. President Trump recently terminated nearly all federal funding for the Unaccompanied Children Program (UCP) contracts, leaving nearly 2,000 children at risk of facing immigration court without legal help and nearly 200 legal staff unfunded. Unfortunately, New York State's chronic underfunding of immigration legal services infrastructure means that legal services programs do not currently have the resources or capacity to take on representation of these vulnerable children. New York must fund immigration legal services capacity building and infrastructure at \$165 million in Fiscal Year 2026 so that we are not caught off guard once again in the future by continuing federal attacks we know are to come. This devastating loss of services demonstrates



that the \$75 million currently proposed for immigration legal services in the Fiscal Year 2026 one house budget is simply not adequate to meet the moment.

New York must lead where the federal government has failed. The state must allocate \$165 million in the FY26 state budget for immigration legal services and infrastructure to equip legal services providers to meet the needs of a changing immigration legal landscape. This level of funding is needed to ensure the long-term stability of legal service providers, many of whom are responding to urgent needs and rising needs from the Trump administration's mass deportation and detention agenda, while also struggling to recruit and retain attorneys due to low pay and stagnant funding. ONA contracts have not adjusted the amount available per attorney in over a decade, leaving public interest lawyers underpaid by as much as 40% compared to similar sector roles. As life-saving legal services come under attack, it is more important than ever for New York to ensure that providers have the support and tools needed to continue serving immigrant New Yorkers.

Governor Hochul, our state has long been a beacon of hope and protection for immigrant communities. This moment demands that we reaffirm that commitment. Your leadership is essential to ensuring that unaccompanied children are not left to navigate this system alone. We stand ready to work with your office to secure these vital investments.

Sincerely,

Center for Elder Law & Justice, Western New York

JustCause, Rochester, NY

The Legal Aid Society of Rochester, Rochester, New York

Empire Justice Center, Rochester, New York & Albany, New York

Volunteer Lawyers Project of CNY, Inc., Central New York Region

Frank H. Hiscock Legal Society, Syracuse, NY

The Legal Project, Schenectady, NY

Empire Justice Center, Albany, New York

Proyecto Faro, Rockland County, NY

Rockland Immigration Coalition, Rockland County

Center for Safety & Change, New City, NY



Grannies Respond / Abuelas Responden, Inc., Beacon, NY

SEPA Mujer, Inc., Patchogue, NY

La Colmena, Staten Island, New York

Arab American Association of New York, New York, New York

Chinese-American Planning Council, New York, New York

Goddard Riverside Community Center - Law Project, New York, New York

HerJustice, New York, New York

JASA Legal Services for Elder Justice, Rego Park, NY

New York Immigration Justice Law & Justice NY, New York, New York

New York Legal Assistance Group, New York, New York

Pro Bono Net, New York, New York

Volunteers of Legal Services, New York, New York

Housing Conservation Coordinators, New York, New York

Worker Justice Center of New York, New York State